

from The Year She Disappeared

Synopsis

The novel opens in mid-December, with Nan Mulholland and her five-year-old granddaughter Jane on a plane from Seattle to the East Coast. Nan is abducting Jane at the request of her daughter Alex, the child's mother, who thinks the child's father has been sexually abusing her. Nan at 66—attractive, vain and self-centered, gutsy—has heart trouble, is the widow of a Foreign Service official. She and Jane have never really gotten along. She and Alex don't, either (dating back to Nan's first extramarital affair when the family was living in Genoa and Alex, age 5, caught them *in flagrante*). Alex has used Nan's guilt about this to make her take Jane away.

Arriving in Providence, Nan discovers that her old school friend, Deenie, whom she expected to stay with, has died. Deenie's caretaker, Val (a young Russian émigré), and his American wife, Mel (a tattooist), befriend Nan and rent her a loft in their building. To disguise her, Mel gives Nan a make-over: teal-blue crewcut, new hip clothes, a tattoo. Nan takes Deenie's last name as an alias and settles down in Providence, the unwilling custodian of a sulky, unhappy little girl. Unsure whether her son-in-law, Gabriel, whom she's deeply fond of, has actually abused his daughter, she tries, unsuccessfully, to talk to Jane. She meets Deenie's executor, a 69-year-old ex-CIA agent named Walker Tice.

A message from Alex: she's had to go into hiding, can't send money anymore. Nan, nearly broke and unable, because she has no ID, to get a regular job, finds work through Mel as a nude model for a group of artists at the Rhode Island School of Design. Meanwhile, Jane seems to be healing, happy at daycare, befriended by Mel and Val, growing closer to Walker. Nan and Walker become lovers. Another message from Alex: Gabriel has hired a detective to track Nan down. Walker proposes to use his CIA connections to take Nan and Jane abroad.

The day before they're to leave, Jane has a tantrum in a public park and runs off, pursued by Walker. An onlooker calls the police; they arrest Nan, who has an apparent heart attack. In the hospital she receives a midnight visit from Alex, who asks her to raise Jane, then—before the unwilling Nan can refuse—disappears. Out on bail, hounded by the Press, Nan agrees to reveal Jane's whereabouts, then at the last minute, during the pre-trial hearing, realizes she can't do it. The judge loses his temper and throws her in jail for contempt.

A week in prison nearly breaks Nan; in the process she discovers what and who she really cares for.



Chapter Sixteen

The first day, Saturday, passed in a blur of disorientation, boredom, and fear. Nan didn't know the rules or the routine, and no one bothered to explain them to her. (What did you expect, she chided herself, a Prisoner's Handbook? A formal briefing? This is not the Foreign Service.) By the end of the day she'd accumulated three demerits and the information that two more would earn her time in something called "Seg."

Except for watching the never-silent TV in the little sitting area along the corridor, there was nothing, absolutely nothing, to do. Her roommates didn't return to the room. They must have been among the many women who stared at her at lunch (she missed breakfast altogether);

but because she'd kept her eyes closed while they spoke that morning, Nan didn't know what they looked like. The room caught the afternoon sun and was hot but cheerful. Each neatly made bunk, except for Nan's, was covered by a bright-colored afghan, obviously homemade. Two or three stuffed animals reposed on each pillow. There were some books on the bottom shelf of one of the night tables: *A Pictorial Atlas of Skin Infections*; the Bible; *Reptiles of the Pacific World*. It seemed unwise to be caught leafing through another prisoner's books, even if they'd been more appealing. Nan left the room and wandered down the sunny corridor. Here and there electric fans pushed the warm afternoon air back and forth. A short man in a Roman collar passed her, arms full of books, small tight button eyes. He did not greet Nan. She went through an open wire door—a small, dark woman mopping the floor had propped it open with her bucket—and into another wing identical to her own. One demerit, happily administered by Safety Pin. Returned to her own wing, Nan sat down before the television to watch "Oprah." A woman with very long, very black hair came and sat down next to her. Nan asked her why she, like all the other women Nan had seen in her wanderings so far, wore blue garments rather than Nan's beige. The woman shrugged apologetically. "*No habla ingles, señora.*" Nan, whose Foreign Service stint had forced her to learn German, Italian, Polish, and Rumanian, knew no Spanish. So that (another pretty shrug from the woman) was that.

Again at dinner (macaroni and cheese that tasted like it smelled, of library paste) no one spoke to Nan. The Scarsdale Matron, she remembered one of her unseen roommates saying. Perhaps everyone saw her that way, thanks to Jenny Root's make-under. She touched her hair, still stiff with spray from its day in court. The heads around her, like the women themselves, could not have been more different: afros, dreadlocks, crewcuts, shags, and the hair of the Hispanic women, either long wild curls or neat buns. They were all young, these women—younger by far than Nan. The ones at Nan's table talked among themselves, complaining about the food, gossiping. She felt the way she had the first day of high school, before she'd found Deenie. Then she'd been odd because she was poor and from the inner city; now the reason was the opposite. But that night, in her room, everything changed. Marjorie changed it.



Here they are, then: Nan's new family. Yet another new family.

Marjorie. Like so many black women, older than she looks. (About forty, Nan judges: she left school at fourteen, in the late sixties, pregnant.) Skin the color of Italian plums, fitted close over broad, strong bones. Hair like coarse cotton thread, every strand alive. Curious. Reads all the time. The books on the night table are hers, except for the Bible. In for abandoning her father, who had Alzheimer's, at the greyhound racetrack in Lincoln, with a note pinned to his sweatshirt about his condition and his care. ("It was him or her grandkids," Donna Jean says. "Now she don't have neither.")

Donna Jean. The tiniest woman Nan has ever seen, not just short (though she is that: four foot ten), but scaled down all over. Red hair, short and shaggy; freckles; a peculiarly intent gaze. "My Lord has shown me how to overcome my downfalls," she tells Nan, who immediately understands that she herself is a target for salvation. In for bombing an abortion clinic, leaving one of the doctors in a wheelchair for life. Transferred here, to Minimum Security, just last month, due to three years of exemplary behavior and the merciful intervention of her Lord.

Ellen. Silent smiler; looks about twelve years old. Bobs her head, conciliating but wordless, when introduced to Nan. Long hair that hides her face, except for red mournful lips. No one knows what she's in for. Sleeves of her blue prison sweater pulled down to hide the tips of her fingers, arms wrapped around her knees while the others explain this new small world to Nan.



Nan couldn't, that second night, climb up into her bed. There really was no ladder. The night before, she remembered now, the young assistant warden had called a guard and together they'd heaved Nan up onto her mattress. Her feet were on the mattress below, her hands clutching hopelessly at the edges of her own.

"You oughta have a medical bottom."

The voice behind her, rich as a preacher's but kinder, surprised Nan so that she let go. She dropped to the floor, stumbled, fell onto one knee.

"Hey!" The woman pulled her up, folded her into the lower bunk. Then she sat down beside her, wide-bosomed, black, motherly. She held a stuffed panda under one arm.

"A medical bottom?" Confused, Nan pictured her own bare behind with a thermometer sticking out it.

"Yeah. You're too old for a top." The woman looked closely at Nan. A wad of chewing gum twitched from cheek to cheek. "Too old to be in here at *all*. What'd you do, girl?"

"My granddaughter, Jane, she's five— I, I kidnapped her."

"Now why'd you wanna go and do a thing like that for?"

"She, her father was—molesting her." No point going into the questions, the uncertainties, the doubts Nan herself still had.

"So you *saved* her. You two hear that?" Marjorie turned to the two women who had just entered the room. Tiny Donna Jean said, "Praise God!" and grasped Nan's hand, while silent Ellen smiled from beneath her tangled hair. A bewildered Nan found herself accepted, suddenly and completely.

Later she would understand that Jane had been her passport, the key to belonging; that to the women in this place the one thing that still mattered—the sole source of strength and resilience and hope—was their children. Now she just leaned into the shadow of the upper bunk, breathless and a little taken aback, as if a door she'd been pushing on had suddenly yielded, catapulting her inside. The room felt full of bodies, humid with sweat and the odor of unwashed hair; but comfortingly so. Marjorie and Donna Jean talked, often at once, contradicting and upbraiding each other. Ellen sat and smiled, occasionally patting the Raggedy Ann doll in the crook of her arm. A tide of information mixed with admonition washed over Nan, more, far more, than she could absorb. Warm night air from the open window brushed her cheek, the back of her neck, and she could hear the sounds of traffic from the freeway beyond the high wire fence. She listened, silent as Ellen. She understood that there was no choice: be adopted, or perish. At last Donna Jean said, "Kids' Day tomorrow, gotta get our beauty sleep," and Marjorie said, "You keep that bunk, honey, I'll trade you," and Ellen said nothing at all. Darkness; silence.

Her new family.



On the second and third days Nan walked and walked. The second day, Sunday, she woke to the far-off sound of church bells, a sound that always (even now, in this place) said *Italy* to her. She slid out of the bottom bunk Marjorie had given her the night before. Without waking the other three, she dressed quickly and left to roam the quiet, nearly empty corridors. She discovered the Library, with its few volumes stacked sideways on the shelves, its smell—it was in the basement and windowless—of mildew. ("Everything is for the men," Marjorie told her later, bitter but resigned. "The women get the leftovers. You oughta see the men's Computer Room.") The

Smoking Porch, with its pool table, its card tables painted with checkerboards (but no checkers), its Pepsi machine. Long and light, a place to catch the summer breezes. (“The guys have a gorgeous gym,” Marjorie said, “*and* a Law Library. The philosophy is, women ain’t likely to cause trouble, let’s take care of the men.”) The Crafts Room, where prisoners could make baby clothes and knit afghans. Only a few such articles could be kept; everything else had to be sent out with a visitor, or it would be confiscated. The yard with its peeling wooden picnic tables, a gangly lilac in one corner, a couple of bees assaulting the pink and red impatiens planted around its trunk. Bird sounds, as cheerful as they are anywhere.

What did you expect? Nan chided herself. Ashes, cinders, carbolic? The smells of Auschwitz? Frivolous comparison. This is not that; this is nothing like that.

Across the street was the Maximum Security building, mirror image of Nan’s own, a long colonial brick structure like a college dorm. It boasted a white-painted dome topped with a weathervane. Down the street were more brick buildings, grassy spaces; the whole place resembled a shabby, down-at-heel college campus. The women’s section of the A.C.I., according to Marjorie, had been built as a mental hospital in the ‘forties. Both Minimum Security, where Nan was, and Maximum Security were still called by the names they’d had then, disarmingly collegiate: Dix Building; Gloria McDonald Building. But there was the endless march of cyclone fencing topped with barbed wire. Miles of glinting silver.

A.C.I. Adult Correctional Institute. Every word a lie: the women so young, so often child-like; the idea of correction (orthodontia for the soul?); “institute,” with its suggestion of seminars and panel discussions.

Nan’s bitter little exercise in translation was interrupted by a sound so foreign to the place that she thought she must be hallucinating. No; there it was again. The sound of children. Laughter, high-pitched squeals, the quick clap of feet. Of course: today was Kids’ Day. If she turned to look out the window, she would see them. Instead, she began to walk back down the empty corridor, faster and faster, until she reached the stairs. She sat in the dim little basement library thumbing through a mildewed copy of *Great Expectations* until she heard the dinner gong sound.

The next day, Monday, was both better and worse.

Because she was classed as “A & T”—Awaiting Trial (because there hadn’t been a trial, only a pre-trial hearing)—Nan wasn’t eligible for work detail. On Monday morning after breakfast, when her roommates disappeared—Marjorie and Donna Jean to the laundry, Ellen to the kitchen—Nan roamed C Wing, looking for other women in beige. (Beige, she’d discovered, was for A & Ts and “Papa Charlies,” women in protective care; sentenced prisoners wore blue.) She struck up occasional conversations, usually accompanied by the sound of TV, either soaps or soul-baring shows. Under her arm—no pockets in prison clothing—she carried a little chintz-covered notebook Donna Jean had given her, with “My Soul’s Journey” printed on it and a tiny green pencil attached to its spine by a string. She wrote down what she saw—just a list at first, then somehow, in the course of that day, Monday, the little book became a record she was keeping for Alex. The display case in the hall outside Warden Gordon’s office, full of karate trophies with the names of the winners—inmates and staff side-by-side—engraved on brass plates. The closed-circuit TV divided into sixteen squares, each captioned, Laundry, Yard, Front Porch, Holding. The cameras. *Cameras everywhere, Alex. In the halls, in the common rooms, in the john, peering evilly down from the corners.*

Like the sense of surveillance, the sense of confinement, of the locked wire doors at either end of C Wing, never left her, though she walked and walked. (Her heart doctor in Seattle, a lifetime ago, would have been pleased.)

Jail was the fate Sister Maria Gratia foresaw for us, Alex. Deenie and me. When they found out who put the crotchless black lace panties down the nuns' laundry chute.

More disturbing than the sense of confinement was the comfort it brought. Relief: that was what Nan felt. She was unspeakably weary, as if her outburst in Court, that decision wrung from her at the last minute, had taken all her strength. Now the phrase *out of my hands* echoed in her head, in her footsteps on the vinyl floor, in the mutterings of the walkie-talkies riding the hips of the guards as she passed by. *Out of my hands*: a chant, a benediction, a prayer. It had, blessedly, replaced The Thought. She, Nan Mulholland, was in jail. There was no longer any action she could take. Everything she saw on her walks confirmed it.

The neutralization of color—like the Soviet Union, all those years ago. *Beige, brown, navy, gray gray GRAY*. The reduction of texture to vinyl, cinderblock, linoleum. The impersonal smells of disinfectant, crumbling plaster, mice, dust. All of it redeemed only by the inmates' tireless knitting of things—afghans, pillow-covers, stuffed animals, bureau scarves—in shouts of yellow and orange and red.

And the women. The women.

They're all losers, Alex. Remember, in high school, when you used to say that? Mary Louise (Possession), small and sleek and deaf, dancing up to you and tugging at your sleeve. Crystal (Prostitution), telling anyone who'll listen, "I'm gonna turn my life around." Sharon (Aggravated Assault), raped by her mother's boyfriend, barely eighteen. Voncile (Dealing), stately, black, hates me for being the Media Queen, as seen on TV before I ever set foot in here. Radiant Lourdes (Prostitution), eight months pregnant, a Spanish galleon in full sail.

The woman in for burglary, a safecracker who once worked for the police. The woman in for manslaughter (reduced from Murder One) for breastfeeding her baby daughter while on heroin. The woman Nan thought of as the Other Grandmother—the only other inmate near her age. She'd gone on driving after her license was pulled, until one day when she couldn't lift her foot off the accelerator and, careening through a city park, had killed three young children. These last two were shunned by all the others. No one spoke to them, no one sat at their table at meals. Children had died.



Talking. Talking. When the women weren't working or napping, they talked.

"Don't be fooled, honey. That Deciolaria, sweet little madonna, she belong to—is it the Latin Queens, or Los Alitos? One a those gangs. Her boyfriend, too. You'll see him Sunday, Kids' Day, he bring their kid *every* week." Marjorie sat cross-legged on the lower bunk, the one she'd given to Nan, her wide jelly breasts packed into a black lace bra. Warm night air poured through the open window.

Deciolaria! Nan thought. Must be the mother of Bug; there couldn't be two women in the A.C.I. named that.

"Those teardrops tattooed on her cheek?" Donna Jean said. "That's one for every person she's killed."

"Nah," said Marjorie. "Could be for deaths in the family, too. Be fair."

"And Voncile, she's been in Seg twice for flunking her ions."

"Ions?" said Nan.

"Yeah, you know. That, like, paper they rubbed over your hands and arms when they brought you in here? They do it three-four times a month. Surprise checks. It detects every drug known to man. Didn't they tell you that?"

“They didn’t tell me anything.”

“Honey! Well, you got *us* now. We will tell you *everything*. Won’t we, Ellen?”



Fourth day, fourth demerit. Alex, you can’t do a thing here without permission. You give up everything of your own, like entering the convent. You belong to them. Your body belongs to them. You can’t move it without asking.

The demerit, for being off her wing, was worth it. Hungry for color, she’d gone to see the murals in B Wing, the Recovery Wing, where former addicts had covered the walls with bright paintings and words of exhortation. (“WELCOME! THIS IS THE FIRST STOP TO THE REST OF YOUR LIFE!” “Hope is the Destination; Love is the Road.”) The guard—small and freckled and clear-eyed—pointed Nan back in the direction of her own wing. Now only one demerit separated Nan from Seg. So what? she thought. What do I have to lose? *Out of my hands.*



Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. By Tuesday, her fourth day, Nan could feel herself clinging to them, moving from one to the next, steppingstones that kept her from falling into the vast anesthetic pool of the day. The big news at lunch (“Fried Calm Plate,” the board above the steam table announced) was a woman on D Wing who’d gone on hunger strike. Something to do with her children; opinions differed as to what. Donna Jean said the Dolphin (their name for fish-faced Warden Gordon) had it in for the woman, whose name was Nancy, because she wouldn’t sleep with him. Marjorie said it was the police, trying to catch Nancy’s boyfriend, though how refusing to let her see her kids would accomplish that, she couldn’t say.

“She’s got gumption. You got to give her that.”

“Gunction? What’s that?”

“*Gumption*, Donna Jean. Christ! The word means ambition.”

“Dear Lord, forgive her, for she knows not what to do.”

“They gonna put her on tomorrow’s medical run, thass what I hear.”

The dining room, in the basement, was lighted by small dusty windows set high in the walls. The effect was vaguely liturgical, women here and there bathed in shafts of light, like Renaissance paintings. Gray-painted cinder block walls; gray cement floor. The steel tables were round and bolted to the floor, each with six round stools attached to its base. The Other Grandmother set her tray down on a table near Nan’s; immediately the two women seated there rose and went to another table.

Next to Marjorie, the safecracker said, “There’s some people I know wanna boycott macaroni and cheese.”

“Why?” Nan asked.

“Because . . . it has something to do with the cigarette companies.”

Donna Jean said, “Nancy goes on the medical run, Doc Shovelton’s gonna see her right. Could be she’ll escape, like, what was her name?”

“Oh, Doc. He all *right*. You meet him yet?” Marjorie turned to Nan, who shook her head. Her mouth was full of gristly vegetable casserole. Carrots, turnips, onions. Roots! she thought, cellar food; and a phrase came back to her from her youth: Mortification of the Flesh. *Penance for our sins—remember, Deenie?*

Enthusiastically the women explained Doc Shovelton to Nan. How he’d been in jail him-

self, nearly seven years, back in the Seventies. An accessory after the fact. He'd given medical care to some black militants who'd bombed a military base, killing a guard.

"He on *our* side, honey. You will love the man. Every one of us does."

Women had escaped while being taken to the hospital for treatment insisted on by Doc. Two, or was it three?

"Course, they couldn't never pin it on him. He's too smart."

"He know what it's like. He escaped *hissself*, while he was A & T. Lord God Almighty! Thass how come he got such a long sentence."

Dessert was bathroom sponges filled with magenta poster-paint. Nan remembered JFK's Berlin Wall speech, "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," much admired by Tod's colleagues in the Embassy at Bonn, whose German did not embrace the knowledge that a Berliner was a jelly-doughnut. That life—had it really happened? It seemed now not merely past, but *other*, not hers, something she'd read or heard about. The lunch-table talk returned to food. The safecracker said that the State spent \$2.10 per day per inmate to feed them, were they going to put up with that? Marjorie recited a recipe she'd read somewhere for Omelette Louis XV: 24 ortolans ("whatever *they* be"), 18 pheasant eggs, 6 whole black truffles. Donna Jean's face shone as if she were praying.



A new sign in the hall announced, "JULY PROGRAMS!!!"

- ADVANCED MACRAME
- DOMESTIC VIOLENCE GROUP
- IDENTIFYING WILD LOVERS
- MIND OVER MOOD

No—that was "WILD FLOWERS." Anyway, no prison programs were open to Nan, the A & T.



"Mulholland! You got a visitor. Move it!"

Nan, who'd begun to wonder why Val and Mel hadn't come to see her, felt a leap of joy. But when the little freckled guard led her to a cubicle off the sitting area of B Wing, the drug rehab wing, it was Jenny Root who sat staring around her at the walls covered with sunrises and ocean waves and encouraging slogans.

Jane! was Nan's first thought. "They found her?" she blurted.

Startled out of her reverie, Jenny Root rose. "Nan! No—no, they haven't."

The guard motioned her to sit down again, then led Nan to the other side of the rickety cardtable. Nan sat, too, knees still wavering. Across it Jenny Root regarded her with a mixture of exasperation and sympathy. Through the open window the sound of a lawnmower approached and receded, approached and receded.

"You okay? You're, like, *pale*."

Nan raised her eyebrows. "I'm incarcerated. Prison pallor—maybe you've heard of it?"

Jenny Root sighed. "Nan. I'm on *your* side."

"Really?"

The guard went around to the other side of the partition, keys jingling. The heady, tickling smell of new-mown grass filled the cubicle. Nan sneezed.

"Look. It was my duty as your attorney to present any offer that might be to your benefit. We've been through this. *You're* my client. Nobody else—not even Jane. Are we on the same page here?"

Ashamed, Nan looked away. How could she tell Jenny Root that her very presence brought back what she, Nan, had been free of for four days now? It brought back Jane. Brought back The Thought.

Jenny Root handed her a kleenex. “Your welfare, not Jane’s. But now it appears they may not be . . . um . . . mutually exclusive.” She waited, watching Nan, who had no idea what she meant. “Lemme explain our position. Sound-Bite Wright is treating this like civil contempt, which he can’t do because this is a criminal charge, but he’s doing it anyway. The way civil contempt works is, the prisoner holds the keys to her cell. All you have to do is show the judge you’re willing to testify truthfully, and you’re free.”

“Let me guess,” Nan said. “I tell him where Jane is, or I’ll rot here.”

“Right. He lifts the contempt charge, and you’re out on bail. The Prosecutor drops the Kidnapping charge. You’re a free woman. If you *don’t* tell, he can keep you in here forever. When your six months’re up, he’ll just charge you all over again.”

Beyond the partition came the jingle of coins, the whir and thump of the Pepsi machine. Nan waited for Jenny Root to urge her to give in, give up Jane. Instead she seized the little table in both hands and shook it till it rattled. “The fucker’s blackmailing us!”

Us.

“It’s like a fuckin’ police state! Lock ’em in a room, keep up the pressure, everybody caves sooner or later. You’ve been imprisoned without trial. That’s fucking unconstitutional. Wright’s makin’ a mockery outta the Law.”

Visibly controlling herself, Jenny Root looked around at the Ex-addicts’ paintings, which covered the walls with sunrises and ocean waves and cheerful-looking animals. “PATIENCE + PERSISTENCE = PROGRESS,” the wall opposite them advised. She got up and peered around the corner of the partition, then came over to Nan’s side of the table and leaned in close. She said softly, under the sound of the lawnmower, “Don’t let the scumbag get away with it.”

The freckled guard appeared, smelling strongly of cigarettes. Jenny Root retreated to her side of the table and sat down hastily.

“Two minutes!” the guard said. She stood at the edge of the partition behind Jenny Root, arms folded, eyes on her prisoner.

Jenny Root crossed her eyes at Nan. “Okay,” she said in her usual lawyerly tone, at her usual speed, “I’m here for two things, one, tell me what you need, two, tell me what you want me to do.” Without a pause for Nan to do either of these: “Val will be here tomorrow, I got permission for him to visit you.”

“Val?” Nan said, distracted by the guard’s unblinking stare.

“*Val.*” Jenny Root’s voice held a peculiar urgency.

“One minute!”

Jenny Root rose. She would file an Appeal. She would keep trying to get Nan put on house arrest with an electronic anklet. For now, at least she’d managed to keep her from being transferred to Maximum. “But be careful. Minimum doesn’t take violent crimes, but there’re a lotta crazies in the jails now, with the mental hospitals closing.” Then came a volley of fast-forward questions—Nan’s health, did she need anything, medication? books? money?—followed by a quick, hard, unexpected embrace.

Val would come to visit, Jenny Root said, hands still on Nan’s shoulders and digging in hard. Again her voice was oddly emphatic. Nan should listen to Val.



Tampon Stew for dinner. Little deaf woman has adopted me. Relentlessly playful. They call me the woman who won’t talk—about Jane, they mean, but she thinks that means I understand Sign. One

of the C.O.s—the guards here are called Correctional Officers, never jailers—went out on lunch break and never came back. The average life expectancy of a C.O. is 57.

What do any of these facts matter?



Two things Nan didn't write down for Alex. That she'd felt relieved to see Jenny Root go. That this evening she'd refused a visit from Gabriel, as it was her right to do. The first right she'd found herself to have, in this place—but one she would not have traded for any other. One that made her feel, for the first time in six months, safe.



Wednesday night, late, long after Lights Out, long after the C.O. had slammed the door and called Goodnight. The curtains were pulled back, and rain-washed night air coursed through the room. The moon, pared to a silver sliver, hung in the unbarred window. The women's faces were visible in the dim light from outside—not moonlight but the lights that burned all night on the guard towers. Marjorie and Donna Jean sat on either end of the lower bunk across from Nan, their feet meeting companionably in the middle. Ellen and Maria, Ellen's lover, occupied the bunk above them. Maria, who was Puerto Rican, had long black hair that rambled across her shoulders and down her plump brown arms. She did not look like a lesbian, but then, what did Nan know about lesbians?

"When I get out, I'm gonna get some fancy heels and a fancy dress and go out dancing with my husband." (Donna Jean)

"I would even enjoy breaking a glass on my kitchen floor. Just normal things." (Maria)

"I miss belly-buttons. Blowing on their belly-buttons." (Marjorie)

"Guys? You blow on guys' belly-buttons?"

"No, bunbrain. My grandkids."

"As much time as I spend sleeping in here, when I am free, *nunca mas*. I will not ever want to sleep no more." (Maria)

They are young, Nan thought. So young they can still think, *someday*. Someday I'll get out of here. Someday I'll live in a pretty white house with my children. Someday I'll understand . . . everything.

And that was when she realized, eyes on the hard bright fingernail of moon, that she herself did not really expect to leave this place. *If the Sun & Moon should doubt*. The open window made her uneasy, as if bars would have kept danger out, rather than prisoners in. Jenny Root had seemed to be saying, this afternoon, that there was some way out of here. Don't let the fucker get away with it, she'd said—as if there were some way Nan could fight him. But I can't, Nan thought now; I can't fight. The weariness she'd felt earlier crawled over her, claiming her inch by inch, like an undertow beneath the whispering women's voices.

"I get out of here, I'm just gonna get laid and *laid*," Marjorie said.

Donna Jean hooted. "By who?"

"Gonna advertise in the Personals, month before I go. 'Musclad Man of Color'—thass how I'm gonna start."

"Those guys? If you saw one sitting here, he would scare you."

"They scare *themselves*."

Laughter pricked the darkness.

Maria said, "I was married once. He would beat me, kick me and stomp me. He bruise my

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ribs. He slice my hand to the point where I need stitches. That is when I make up my mind. *Nunca mas.*”

“Yeah—you can make up your mind. But how you gonna make up your heart?”

“He was a deeply troubled person,” Donna Jean offered.

“He was . . .” a whispered word, in Spanish. “A douche-bag.”

Laughter like dry leaves.

Donna Jean said that before she found Jesus she used to want to have sex with Morrissey’s voice. Marjorie had a longstanding crush on Gorbachev, whom she referred to as “that bald Russian dude with the map of Alaska on his head.” Nan’s stock went up briefly when she said she’d met him once; then it was decided that she must be lying.

Ellen sat up, a quick motion of protest, or distress. Her Raggedy Ann doll fell to the floor with a soft thud. She rubbed her palms over her face. The gesture pushed her hair back from her forehead, and in the not-quite-moonlight Nan saw a band of red scars cross-hatched across it.

Donna Jean said, “‘Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then, face to face.’ Lookin’ at that moon, don’t it make you *know* there is a Higher Power?”

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Three a.m. As she did every night, Nan woke with a clenching in her belly, the way she used to after Tod died: a sort of twisting inward, which she eventually came to recognize as loss. She lay awake in the nickel-colored light, listing her losses. First Tod; then Deenie. Now Alex, Val and Mel, Walker.

b

Jane.

a

Nan rolled over, in tiny motions so as not to wake her roommates, and pulled the notebook out from under her pillow. Her fingers found the little pencil and she began to write, forming the letters slowly, by feel.

r

l

Do you remember, Alex? The moon bleeding into thin clouds over the Mediterranean; the powdery sound of moths against the window screen?

e

m

Look, Mama! you said. The moon’s a big, big clamshell.

a

The clouds thickened. The moon disappeared. There was only dark ocean melting into darker sky.

n

Does it always come back? you asked.

Always, I lied.

Nan shut the notebook and tucked the little pencil into its spine. When it was safely back under her pillow—turned over now to the cool side—she closed her eyes. After a while there was rustling from the top bunk across the room, then a freighted silence. Then Ellen’s small soft cries—the only sound Nan had ever heard her make—and the quickening twang of bedsprings. The smell that traveled on the damp air made Nan remember, though it was different, the smell that she and Walker made. Uniquely theirs—perhaps every couple’s was different?—compounded from the tangible fluids of their separate desires.

Comforted, she fell asleep.